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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the collaborative work between an art historian/curator and a visual artist exploring the often trouble relationship between artists and curators. The common idea emerging from both perspectives was that of the museum, both as an image and an institution. The paper examines the history of the museum as an institution and how that definition has changed over time. The paper is presented as a dialogue from the two perspectives to try to address some of the common issues and concerns for both the artist and curator. (EH)

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Artists and Curators as Collaborators: Developing a New Practice of Exhibition.

by Patricia Briggs

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Artists and Curators as Collaborators: Developing a New Practice of Exhibition

Patricia Briggs and Laura Migliorino

Laura Migliorino:

As if in a dream I thought that curators and artists could work together, sharing ideas, forming exhibitions, working on a whole range of other projects: turning the museum inside out. This dream was fueled by a conversation I had one evening in Chicago with a Medieval scholar and curator. We talked wildly, each from our own perspectives-- she a Medievalist, I, a visual artist dealing with the subject of AIDS in my work. We spoke of images of the plague, of redemption, and the man of sorrows. We quickly realized each others' skills, knowledge and motivation, but were equally aware of the difficulties that would be involved in truly attempting to collaborate on a project together. Neither of us felt that our professional "tracks" had encouraged our collaboration. And it was not surprising that, only in a personal context—an informal dinner—had we found ourselves sharing our common interests. We parted company somewhere underneath the L and moved back into our prescribed professional roles as curator and artist. Yet this conversation left me with nagging thoughts about curators and artists and their unique professional relationship. So often I have found this relationship to be strained. My personal experience has shown me that some curators are unwilling or unable to talk with me comfortably about the development of my work and the way that is exhibited.

With these thoughts in mind I decided to initiated a dialogue concerning the artist/curator relationship with a curator. I called Patricia Briggs—an art historian and independent curator who I knew professionally—and invited her to work with me

on writing a paper exploring the often troubled relationship between artists and curators.

Patricia Briggs:

When Laura Migliorino invited me to co-author a paper about artists and curators, I saw it as an invitation to a conversation. I understood well the difficulties of which she spoke: issues such as "conflict of interest" and the curators traditional role as the arbiter or "quality" came to my mind.[1] This conversation or dialogue would have no rules and it was without a clear and defined goal. It was an invitation, then, to explore uncharted territory—territory where the boundaries between *professional* venture with *private* exploration were frightfully blurred.

L.M: ***The paper that we were working on became a performance of the interaction of our ideas, images, and experiences. And producing a projected image collage—which we share with you here-- became another concrete way of collaboratively welding together our different perspectives and strengths.***

As we tossed around ideas and visual images that expressed the heart and soul of our concerns we found ourselves returning again and again to the museum, ***both as an image and as an institution. It is this institution---the museum-- which has structured the relationship between artists and curators. Through research on history and the museum, theorizing the semiotics of display, and by looking at museums through the camera's lens, we were struck by how seemingly accessible the museum was to us, while at the same time so much of its history and its function were invisible and seemingly inaccessible.***

One of goals, then, was to try to understand, or figure out, just what a museum is and what our roles are and can be within it.

P.B:

History:

In recent years, due no doubt to the critical l impact of the work of Michel Foucault devoted to the disciplining structures of institutions such as the asylum and the prison, there has been an explosion of interest on the topic of the museum *as an institution*—its history and its discursive structures.

Like all societal institutions, the form and meaning of the museum has changed over time. The collecting of art, like the word *museum* itself, has been traced to antiquity--to the collecting of objects in ancient temples, tombs, and treasuries.[2] In the Middle Ages, the church and the cathedral served as the locus for the production and the display of art. During antiquity and the Middle Ages works of art served a votive or ritual function. In a sense, art was *collected*, but not in the way that it came to be collected during the Renaissance and after.

During the Renaissance, antique works of art began to be organized into collections by princes, elite circles of nobility, and members of court.[3] In fact, by the mid seventeenth century collecting had become something of a mania. Still, during the Renaissance the collection and display of art objects differed greatly from collecting in the *modern* sense. The Renaissance "cabinet of curiosities" or *Wunderkammer*, placed works

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[1] For an example of the "trouble" see, Shannon Wilkinson, "Career Management: What Now?--Career Management for Established Artists," *Art Calendar* (September 1996), 5-7.
[2] Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*, (Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1992, p.93.

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of art, natural curiosities, manuscripts, and scientific instruments side by side. And while Renaissance collections were an expression of curiosity and connoisseurship, they also functioned as a symbolic expression of wealth and power.

L.M: ***Should an art object be useful to the collector or should its role be to reflect the life and experiences of the artist?***

P.B: Late in the seventeenth century art collections and natural science collections began to be organized separately. Nonetheless, during this period the exhibition of art served as an expression of royal power—the art exhibition was a means of making royal power *visible* before courtly society.[4]

The *modern* museum—that is, the *public* museum—took shape during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this period art was made available to a broader viewing public. Significantly, collections of art viewed by the public now came to serve as symbols of *national pride* and cultural patrimony rather than of royal power. The museum came to be the locus of *high culture*, and works of art on view began to serve the purpose of educating and civilizing the population [Bennett, p.19].

Thus, the conscious collection of art and its display, since the late seventeenth century, has been closely linked to the regulation of power from above. The relationship between the art object, the artists, and the viewer, was shaped first by the interests of the prince or monarch, and later by the interests of the nation or state. The professions of the art historian and the museum curator—the latter means "manager, overseer, or guardian"—have been shaped by the demands of these larger structures. The curator is a

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[3] Per Bjurström, "Physiocratic Ideals and National Galleries," in *The Genesis of the Art Museum in the 18th Century* (Stockholm: Nationalmus eump), p.28.

kind of custodian of high culture, and the practices of evaluation, classification, and edification, often serve to regulate ideological norms.[5] The museum's curator acting as an arbiter of taste and "quality," in a sense, arbitrates power. These institutional dictates shape the often-times tense relationship between artists and curators.

L.M. ***Why as an artist do I feel that I am forced to stand outside of the museum peering in? Why can't we blur the traditional barriers and pre-assigned roles that create struggle and distrust between the artist and the representatives of the museum system? Why do I feel useless after I am finished making the piece of art, at best a tolerated nuisance to the museum, whose presence is only desired at openings like a performing monkey?***

P.B:

The power of the museum to dictate the meaning and function of art has not gone uncontested. In the nineteenth century, the private gallery emerged as a counter to the state's control over the display of art.

L.M: ***But I don't see the private gallery as any different from the museum. Does a gallery owner invite me, the artist, to share in the control of the exhibition of my work? Are the galleries and the museum really any different from the perspective of the artist? What we need here is a reconciliation of power.***

P.B:

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[4] Elias quoted in Bennett, p. 21. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

[5] For the museum's role in regulating ideological norms see, Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruin* (MIT Press, 1993); Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (University of Chicago Press,1989); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (Routledge, 1995); Diane Nemiroff, "Modernism, Nationalism and Beyond," and Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson, "Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums," in eds. Reesa Greenberg , Bruce Ferguson, and Nancy Nairne, *Thinking about Exhibitions* (Routledgge, 1996); Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (Routledge, 1996).

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During the twentieth century, there have been a series of artistic movements which have challenged the right of the state or the commercial gallery to control the manner in which art is presented to the public. Dada performance, for example, attacked or disrupted the normative structures of exhibition. After Dada and Surrealism came the conceptual art of the 1960s and the performance art of the 1970s. It is here, in the historical avant-garde, that we find the roots of postmodernism, with its insistence on revealing ideological structures and critiquing dominant cultural institutions.[6]

This brings us to the present, the current, —one might say, the *postmodern*— critique of the exhibition of art and the museum.

For some time now, artists have been musing over, reconsidering, and generally struggling with issues such as the relevance of *beauty* as an artistic category, the *function* of art, the significance of the *original*, and the politics of *display*. And not surprisingly numerous books and articles written during the 1980s and 1990s look carefully at the material practice and ideological function of museum display.

L.M.

Patricia and I can see that with in our professions others are also attempting to redefine the traditional roles of the artist and curator. Slowly, in certain circles—particularly outside of the museum itself, "independent" curators and artists are initiating a new kind of dialogue. And exhibitions like the one on view right now at Clemantine gallery here in New York—"Why Can't We All Get Along" –which features both emerging artists and emerging curators--point to changes which are already underway.

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[6] Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *After the Great Divide* (Indian University Press, 1986)

P.B.

The first wave of critical writing focused on the museum identified the problem of *exclusion*. Beginning in the 1970s artists and scholars focused on the exclusion of people of color and of women from museums and galleries. At that time attention was focused on the racist and classist assumptions shaping exhibitions and museum programming. The critical work devoted to the museum's exclusions, revealed a kind of "us" and "them" dynamic built into the heart of the museum's ideological fabric.

A second wave of conceptualizing focused on the ways that the material space of the museum, phenomenologially, and discursively "hail" the viewer. Here I am referring to the work of scholars such as Rosiland Krauss's, Douglas Crimp, Tony Bennett, and Mieke Bal.

Mieke Bal, for example, points out a binary structure—the "I" and the "you"—at work in museum display. Her semiotic analysis identifies the institutional "I" spoken by the museum's authoritative and seemingly neutral architecture, spatial planning, and docu panels. Within the texts of museum docu panels Bal identifies the authoritative "I" , the anonymous third person speaker implied by institutional discourse. And she points to the troubling "you" who is hailed by this authoritative "I". This "you" is a homogeneous, ideal subject, which does not allow for the very real differences among museum visitors. Like so many contemporary theoreticians, Bal advocates disrupting this binary and redefining the way that the museum hails the viewer-- redefining it, that is, in a less disciplining fashion.

Increasingly museums have felt the pressure of these critiques and have made attempts to include greater diversity in their exhibition choices and educational

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programming. Yet, while museums have responded to the challenge of the first wave of criticism, many of the disciplining frameworks attacked by critics like Bal remain largely in place. Though its criterion of choice may change, for the most part the museum maintains the "us" / "them", "I" /"you" structure at its core.

L.M. ***The meaning of a work of art doesn't stop at its physical boundary. The meaning of art is always shaped by the conditions under which it is displayed. Artists should see involvement in the contextualization of their work in museum and gallery documentation and catalogues as an opportunity to further shape the meaning of their work.***

P.B.

In our work together Laura and I have attempted to undermine some of the authoritative structures which often locate artists and curators—even independent curators like myself-- in different places doing fundamentally different work. By allowing for two very different voices to be heard in this paper, neither of our voices is eclipsed by the other's. In this way we disrupt the institutional "I".

L.M: ***Last summer I worked on an installation for an exhibition called* Room. *I was struck by the unique working experience that I had with the three curators of that show—Patricia was one of them. The curators of* Room *encouraged a dialogue with the artists that were invited to participate in the show. Because of this, I found that my work was being developed rather than critiqued. The conversations I had with the curators of Room were not punitive, but rather challenged me. We didn't simply have a discussion, we engaged in a dialogue. As a result, my installation came to integrate aspects of the physical site more successfully, and the piece was enriched conceptually.***

My experience with these curators showed me how artists and curators can relate to one another and work together with a common investment in the art work itself and in the exhibition. Having seen this type of relationship in action, I believe a model like this one can and probably should replace the traditional model of interaction between artists ad curators.

I have been encouraged and inspired by my work on this project with Patricia. In establishing our relationship in this collaborative team I've become more aware of how our various skills and interests come together creating a dynamic union. In working on this paper and image collage I have benefited from Patricia's quick scholarship and look foreword to the piles of readings that she brings to our meetings. Our conversations and shared reading encourage the intellectual and historical aspects of my work. I bring out an image. She responds with a concept. I discuss the technical possibilities. She discusses the history of exhibition practice or the politics of performance art. As we work together making images--I bring the cameras and set the shutter speeds and talk about the possibilities of slide dissolve and images of blurred bodies, she notices the historical resonance's of the museum's architecture and the story that the museum tells by the arrangement of the paintings upon its walls. We talk and talk and we look and we shoot photographs and organize images and we listen and we ask questions. In this way we attempt to challenge the confining structures that traditionally shape our professional relationship.

P.B:

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The fact that Laura—an artist—wanted to use an *academic* paper as a forum for exploration, itself challenged the boundaries of her profession as they are so often defined. It seems that even today, artists are encouraged to *make*, and not to *speak*.

Over the months that we have worked on our projects together I have made efforts to put old categories behind me in order to imagine different ways of working. For example, in addition to the research that I've done for this project, I have kept a personal journal record of my thoughts and feelings about working collaboratively with an artist. I've used the journal as a place to brainstorm about ways that our talents and interests might intersect in imaginative and productive ways. How for example might our collaboration breakout of traditional patterns of exhibition display? Perhaps as a curator or commentator I could write directly on Laura's work, or I might make docu panels out of collage materials. This journaling influenced a collaborative project I have been working on with another artist: Stevie Rexroth. Steivie and I put together an exhibition of her photographs. Additionally, we mounted transparencies of my written texts devoted to her work in light boxes and hung these glowing text-objects on the walls along side her framed photographs. The juxtaposition of our work in this way allowed my texts to take on the quality of aesthetic *objects*. In turn, Stevie's photographs took on something of the quality of written *texts*. In this exhibition, I think that the artist and I collaborated successfully, disrupting the normative structures which regulate the separation of art work and critical commentary.

L.M: ***Because we have stepped out of the professional frameworks that usually anchor us, a collaboration like Patricia's and mine requires that we relinquish a certain amount of control and develop trust, as we stretch our understanding of the***

relationship between the curator and the artists. To be honest it is both frightening and exhilarating, I temporarily panicked when it was suggested that she might at some point add her words physically onto my images.. But this a collaborative process; we challenge ownership and turf to create something that breaks new ground, and creates new conceptual paths and tangible results.

P.B:

The projected image collage has been, for me, the most effective response to the problem that Laura and I posed for ourselves. Without becoming an artist—and I am not a "frustrated artist"—this project enabled me to be involved in an image-making exploration of ideas, in a way that was quite inaccessible to me before our collaboration. Our image collage is a *hybrid* object—falling somewhere between an academic slide lecture and an art work. Looking at a series of museums through the camera's lens was a fundamentally different experience for me than visiting the museum as a scholar or working in a museum as a curator. Through the camera's lens, I saw the museum differently. I noticed for the first time the specificities of its varied audiences and found myself reading the museum through its details rather that through its attempts to orient me as a visitor.

L.M: ***Patricia and I can work together all we want, but if things are going to change institutions like the museum are not the only ones that we need to consider. The way that artists and art historians are educated also needs to change. I firmly believe that the current system in training art historians fails to prepare the art historian to relate to the artists, either living or dead. They are well prepared in the understanding of the object of art—its history, cultural context, aesthetic impact—but***

there is a gap between the understanding of the artist—her practices and processed—and the finalized art object. This gap must be closed.

If we compare the curriculum of the art student and the art history student, we see a lack of studio courses for art historian where as the art student is required and encouraged to study art history, criticism and aesthetics. When artists are educated we are taught the value of art history and theory—and it is important! We need to understand our own work as it relates to the work that proceeded ours. Yet, the art history student is seldom given the opportunity, nor are they encouraged to explore, the practice of making art.

I've come to believe that because artists and art historian/curators are rarely educated together, they do not learn to share ideas, develop mutual respect and the ability to work more collaboratively. In the restructuring of education of the art historian and modifying the education of artists we will create professionals that can work together more collaboratively; creating exhibitions, and co-authoring papers and articles.

In looking forward, past our own collaboration we would like to see the museum become a place not only for the care for and preservation of art, but an active laboratory for living contemporary artists, curators, and other art professionals. The museum will become a place of common ground where we share ideas and resources in joint effort. I see a future where artists, curators and art historians, all speaking with different voices, can work together as equal partners.

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